



Time Runs Out



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Chapter 1 by Hestia

Death is inescapable, inevitable, ineluctable. It looms over you like a demon waiting to strike, a crow ready to swoop.

Us in Adinne know this and we accept it as the truth. In separate places, the people of the Eastern, Southern and Western Unions, they believe it not to be. They trust that there is always escape. That there is always a way out.

But the other Unions are not as perceptive and sensible as we of the Northern Union are. The Northern Union is erudite, knowledgeable and prescient and discerning. We have better understanding of the world and its works. We know that death is coming for us all.

My retina screen buzzes and the sugary sweet voice of the interface speaks, "It is seven-forty AM. Be ready to leave for Training in exactly twenty minutes."

A smile lingers on my face as I give a small wave to Aren and half-whisper, "It's time for me to leave now."

Goodbye. He beams as I turn away and head for my own room, closing Aren's door behind him.

This hallway is long and dark, not like the ones I've seen in the movies. I felt this way to me, but with the recent disappearance of a

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It hadn't been Majel's time yet. He wasn't due for another few years, and yet he was gone. Who knew what was happening to him now, being tortured, or...

I gulp in air and push open the door to my bedroom; it makes a loud creak and I wince, mentally noting to speak to Father about that.

The room seems dark even with the chandelier hanging overhead, and I shiver, a feeling of damp sadness fills me. Yet it is fulfilling.

I don't understand why the colours must be so dark, gray and black and brown. I could just as easily ask Father to change it and he'd grant my wish, sending the Painters to make it bright and sparkly. But I don't want to change these walls, for it would be like changing myself. I've lived with it all my life and the fact that I enjoy something so unhappy and dark is unsettling for me.

But that was that. My room would stay dark, and that's the way I like it.

One thing I did appreciate about this room was the calming effect it had on me. A nice big, fancy window to look out and see the whole of Adinne and breathe in the fresh air, and a huge comfy bed to lay on and read, and a mini training room to practice all my skills. I felt more at home here than anywhere else.

I realize that I am quite pressed for time, and I run for the bathing room. I unzip my nightwear and peel it off my skin, sighing as my tense muscles began to relax. I drop the nightwear into the recycle bin without a second thought.

"Would you like a brisk shower, Cadet Rafuse?" The shower Interface asks in the same sweet voice as my retina screen's Interface.

"Of course, Interface." A small smile plays on my lips. "Would you expect anything else?"

"No, Cadet Rafuse," The Interface answers simply, and my smile disappears as I wish once again that the Interfaces might have a sense of humour.

Warm water falls in raindrops on my skin, cascades down on my head, spilling down my face and hair.

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The few minutes of relaxation end as I lock the shower door and step outside of the bathing room with a white towel wrapped around myself. I walk to the dressing room rather slowly,

holding the towel tight to my chest.

Once inside a small sigh escapes my lips, releasing the towel and standing under the clothing area. A liquid quickly forms on my skin and quickly hardens into the soft rubber that is the appropriate Cadet outfit.

A hand lightly taps my back and I whip around, ready to yell at Skyanna. Yet it is not her who stands behind me.

"Hello, Father," I say, smiling faintly. It's oh-so-very rare when Father is in such a good mood as this. He beams back at me, though I know he's not happy for the sake of seeing me.

"Good news, Callix," he says, "We're doing Pilot Training today. First time in three months. The skyways are finally safe to fly again."

Pilot Training. One of my more favoured activities. I grin at him.

"Who's decision was it?" I ask curiously, wondering if it had been Father himself. But he simply shakes his head.

"Classified information, dearest." He grins, but I can see a falter in his bright smile. "Now come with me, I do believe it is time to leave." He holds out a hand to me and I take it, clasping his hand in my own.

I do not particularly enjoy the walk to the Training Facility, for it is dull and barren. A skywalk down to the ground has a nice view, but from there, as you go down to the ground, the city fades and you are left with nothing but a gravel path, glossed over and made smooth and shiny.

The walk is uneventful as usual, seeming to take ages though it took hardly more than a minute. And though I dislike the walk, the view of the Facility is beautiful once you have reached it. It is the highest building in all of Adinne, as high as the skyways. A pretty sleek black colour, windows dot every floor up to the very top. Outside of the building are the hovercrafts, different sizes, shapes and colours, all of them utterly flawless.

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Green grass, cut to perfection by the latest laser-cutter model, circles the buildings. The grass is not to be stepped upon, only as a decoration to make the Facility look less bleak; though I can't imagine why they thought it was bleak in the first place. And finally; the tiny gravel path widens into a shimmering path of dark gray, still glossed over like the gravel path had been.

We continue to walk the path, hand in hand. Father slowly releases, and as he turns off to head for the starships in which he works, I am left alone on the pathway.

The Facility looms over me as I reach the doorway, almost menacingly. The doors swing open and I enter the building.

While the exterior of it is astounding, the type of thing that makes you gasp in amazement; the interior is beautiful and relaxing to all. The first floor is huge, circling all around. Most of it is made up of lounging areas filled with the most comfortable sofas and fanciest tables, though in the centre is the wide glass elevator, looking as though it could fit twenty Cadets.

'Please state your name and rank.' I hear the usual male voice of the Interface upon stepping on the pressure plate in the small entryway.

"Callix Rafuse, Blue Sector Cadet," I say, tapping my foot impatiently as I awaited the Interface's answer.

'Blue Cadet Rafuse is assigned to Pilot Training. Please proceed to the outdoor hovercrafts located to the left of the Facility.'

I turn around and push through the small group of Cadets shuffling in. One of them glares and shoves me back, but I don't bother with him.

In the outside world of normal Civilians, Cadets are known to be rude, sophisticated, and completely stuck-up. And sure, some of them are. But the Civilians glance at you in the street with a look of disgust, and sometimes jealousy too.

Not everyone has a chance to be a Cadet. Here in the huge population of our province, the numbers of Cadets seem pretty low. Only a tenth of the population. And it's not because no one wants to be a Cadet. It's because it's so hard to become one.

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But to be a Cadet you must be talented. Quite talented indeed. Your Clock has to have a significantly higher amount than normals. But for that to happen, you must have rich, high-level parents. And there are plenty of those, but chances are slim that they'll spend money on that.

The courtyard where the hovercrafts lay seems all the much bigger when you're up close. I haven't been here in months, and every time I see it, the view surprises me.

I spot the Instructor at the foot of a hovercraft that looks to be the smallest one. Six other kids surround her, all of them familiar to me. Zora, Echo, Ender, Makai, Roman, Caine. Only one Cadet is still missing.

"Callix. Glad to see that you have joined us," Instructor Allei tips her head in greeting and I almost nod back at her, but jumped when Zora poked me and whispered "Salute!" and quickly obeyed the command, saluting immediately to the Instructor.

I was never the best at remembering things. My head is filled with thoughts, my imagination could go on forever, and yet they all expect me to remember all fifty Cadet rules. I've been a Cadet for three years now, and by this point hardly anyone ever corrects me anymore, they simply shake their heads in disappointment.

"Thank you," Allei says, her tone light. "Let us begin."

Echo raises a shaky hand. She was never one to talk, usually stayed silent and did as she was told. But not today, and we all know exactly what she's going to ask.

"Yes, Echo?" Allei taps her foot impatiently.

Echo mutters something incomprehensible, but upon realizing that she had not been heard, says it more clearly. "Where is Ember?"

"Ember is...not here today." Allei says, and though her face is like stone, I think I saw a flicker of doubt behind her eyes, an unsolved mystery. I shrug it off, though, and tune in as Allei begins the lesson.

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The first hour of review is uneventful but you can't blame the Cadet lessons are never boring everyone who's anyone knows the Cadet lessons have already been taught about

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hovercrafts and flight. It is refreshing, without the reviews I would be extremely tense during the flight.

Somehow the hour ends and Allei announces, "Blue Sector Cadets! You are ready to board Hovercraft Fifteen, alias: Mayfleet the Third! Line up!"

We quickly salute - luckily this time I remember to do so - and get into our line, in order of rank. I am second last, Makai the only one behind me. Ember is normally the first in line, the most advanced of our Sector. She's set to move onto Green Sector within a month. But this time it's Caine in the very front.

But I can't help but to wonder, what exactly happened to her? No one just simply misses their class unless they want a demerit. Something must have happened to her.

Soon it is my time to board. I swipe my Cadet card and it accepts, opening the door with a whoosh of air. I climb aboard and walk towards my fellow Cadets, sitting on either sides of the hangar. I take my seat next to Ender on the left side and sigh.

Soon Makai has boarded and we quietly converse as we await the Lift. The safety belts automatically come over our heads and click shut.

"What do you think happened to Ember?" The others have noticed it too. I expect nothing less, all Cadets must be very intellectual to even have a chance.

"Maybe she's sick?" Zora offers, and Echo nods in agreement.

"Maybe she was taken by the Timeless." It was meant as a joke, but Roman's face falls when Caine glares at him from across the hangar.

"In all seriousness," Ender says, "I've heard that the Timeless are moving closer to the Northern Union."

"That's a lie," Caine says. "Where in the world did you ever hear something so despicable?"

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"From the Master of Education himself," Ender says, rolling my eyes. Ender makes it his job to remind everyone that the Master of Education is a mighty jerk indeed. Never trust a man

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"The Master of Education is a mighty jerk indeed. Never trust a man

who can manipulate you into murdering your closest friend."

The words are harsh, and silence falls as we are all reminded of that day. It is quiet for a few minutes before I decide to speak up.

"The Master of Education is not as much of a jerk as you think."

All heads swivel and turn to me. Caine nods, urging me to continue.

"Though he did manipulate that man, he did it so that the other man would be put out of his misery." A few nods. Caine opens his mouth to argue, but he's not heard over the roar of the engines starting. And the hovercraft begins to hover.

We sit in silence as we lift into the sky, and when the force of the hovercraft moving upwards ceases, the safety belts unlatch and we stand in unison. Quickly, we form a line and Caine enters the Control Room.

Pilot Training is an extremely nerve-wracking part of Training. Kids fail it, they cry. You'll never become a Pilot or Officer if you fail Pilot Training.

I'm definitely not the best at it. Even with my high ranking in Weaponry and Intellect, with Pilot Training added the rank drops significantly lower.

No one has ever died during Pilot Training. The Leaders are quite sure of that, they make it extremely safe for us all. If you're about to crash, the Instructor takes over and therefore, you live. Simple as that. But it didn't make it any less terrifying when you're about to crash into the Facility.

The line moves up very slowly. Each Cadet is given exactly thirty minutes to show their skills, and then they sit back in the hangar. Soon Ender comes out, looking flushed and embarrassed. No one bothers to question him as he plops down into his seat. Echo takes a few steps forward and is hardly a step into the Control Room when the hovercraft shakes wildly and begins to

descend.

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The Cadets quickly descend into a state of panic. Ender starts screaming. Caine is pacing, his face more serious than ever. I'm sitting there, trying to stay calm, but I'm shaking as though they're about to cry.

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No one had ever died during Pilot Training. Apparently we were about to be the first.

"Caine! Zora! Callix! To the engine room!" Instructor Allei shrieks from the Control Room. Her expression of fear unnerved me even more. "Take your tasers! Someone's sabotaged the engine! I'm trying to keep it in control!"

Zora releases Echo and barged towards the engine room, taser in hand. I grab my own and followed her out.

The engine room isn't too far from the hangar, hardly a few feet. Just how had someone managed to sneak into it so easily?

Caine runs ahead of us and with a mighty heave, flings open the door to the engine room. He yells something incomprehensible and charges. Zora and I quickly catch up to him.

Inside is a man and a woman, wearing full black armour. I curse under my breath and scan the armour.

Every suit of armour has an Achilles Heel.

The man's mouth curves into a smile and I shiver. Where was the Achilles Heel again? Was it the back of his neck?

"Callix. Caine." Zora's voice shakes with every word. "They aren't just rogues. They're..." She trailed off.

"Get on with it!" I hiss, not taking my eyes off of the man. And then I notice something. His ankle, void of the ticking clock that's always been there.

"They're Timeless."

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